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THE BOYHOOD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

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CONCERNING the childhood and youth of the great forerunner of Jesus there is an almost entire dearth of information. Of the four gospels the one by Luke alone gives any notice of the Baptist's life previous to the beginning of his public ministry, which apparently took place but a short time before the baptism of Jesus. He must have been then a man of at least thirty or thirty-one years of age. The other gospels begin their account of John abruptly with the words: "In those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea" (Matt. 3:1); "Even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face . . . John came, who baptized in the wilderness and preached" (Mark. 1:2, 4); "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6). The Acts of the Apostles contain only the slightest reference to John, and then simply to his public ministry; while the epistles do not mention him. The Christian apocryphal writings also are almost entirely void of any reference to John's early life; the one noteworthy exception being the protevangelium of James, which contains a single incident connected with the massacre of the innocents.

The absence from all the New Testament writings, save the third gospel, of any allusion to the remarkable circumstances of John's birth raises some interesting questions. These questions increase in interest when we make a comparative study of Luke's account of John's nativity and his account, also in many particulars unique, of the nativity of Jesus. They cannot be discussed here, but it may be worth while to present the salient features of each in parallel, at least those features which are analogous.

The conception of John was preannounced by the angel

Gabriel to Zacharias; the conception of Jesus was preannounced by the same angel to Mary.

In both cases the name of the child was designated by the angel, and both names are peculiarly significant.

John was born of priestly descent; Jesus was born of royal descent.

John was born of a woman who was "well stricken in years," and therefore beyond the period of child-bearing; Jesus was born of a virgin.

Before the birth of either child the two mothers met and Mary gave utterance to a *Magnificat* of exalted eloquence; at the circumcision and naming of John, Zacharias gave utter-



THE VISITATION—GHIRLANDAJO

ance to a *Benedictus* scarcely less noble in thought and expression than the *Magnificat*. Both of these are in the language and spirit of the loftiest Old Testament scripture. Comparing these two, Dr. Plummer² says: "As the *Magnificat* is modeled on the Psalms, so the *Benedictus* is modeled on the prophecies, and it has been called 'the last prophecy of the Old Dispensation and the first of the New.' And while the tone of the *Magnificat* is regal, that of the *Benedictus* is sacerdotal. The one is as appropriate to the daughter of David as the other to the son of Aaron."

Is it significant that the reappearance of Hebrew prophecy, after a silence of centuries, occurs in the priestly line?

² In the *International Critical Commentary* on Luke, in *loc.*

John was born in the year 6 B. C.¹ His father, Zacharias, was a rustic priest who belonged to the restored course of Abijah, the original course not having returned from the exile. His name, like so many Hebrew proper names, has a religious significance; Zacharias means "remembered by Jahveh." John's mother was Elisabeth, or Elisheba, which means "God of my oath," a daughter of a priest. Both parents are spoken of as "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Their home is believed by some writers to have been in a town about four miles north of Hebron, called Juttah, which has been identified by Dr. Robinson with the modern Yutta. Concerning this, however, there is great uncertainty. Luke's expression is simply "into a city of Judah." This *may* mean Hebron, though this is not altogether likely, since, had Luke known the name of the town, most probably he would have given it. Something may be said for the suggestion that Judah in the text is a modification of Juttah. Jewish tradition, however, is in favor of identifying the "city of Judah" with Hebron. On behalf of Juttah it may be urged that it is one of the mountain towns which are mentioned in Joshua 15:55, and allotted to the children of Aaron in Joshua 21:16; though it does not appear in the list given in 1 Chronicles, 6:57-59.

The story in the protevangelium of James would seem to indicate that the home of John's parents was not far from Bethlehem.

Zacharias and Elisabeth were old and childless. The supreme blessing of the domestic life had been denied them. It is fair to infer, from the single expressive notice of their character given by Luke, that they had borne their trial with patient resignation.

Sometime in the early autumn of 6 B. C., perhaps in the month of October, while Zacharias was in Jerusalem discharging his priestly office at the temple, the lot fell to him to offer incense before the Lord in connection with the daily sacrifice. This function was considered a very great honor, and no priest might

¹ This is the date agreed upon by most modern scholars.

have it twice. Since the number of priests was large, many of them never enjoyed the honor. The offering of incense took place in the morning and in the evening of each day. Whether Zacharias officiated at the morning or evening service Luke does not say; probably it was at the early worship; but, while he was discharging his holy function, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and, after quieting the startled priest's fears, announced to him that his aged wife should bear a son, who should be named John ("grace" or "favor," the full name Johanan meaning "Jahveh is gracious"). Concerning this child the angel said that his birth should be an occasion of rejoicing



THE BOY JOHN—MURILLO

both to his father and to many others; that he should be "great in the sight of the Lord;" that he should be a Nazarite, abstaining from wine and strong drink; that he should be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb; that he should turn many Israelites unto God; and that he should go before God "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just: to make ready for the Lord a prepared people."

Zacharias, doubting, as innocently he might, asked of the angel a sign, and in answer was immediately stricken with loss of speech.

In due time the promise of the angel approached fulfilment,

and Elisabeth received a visit from her kinswoman from Galilee, Mary, the wife of Joseph. At this meeting the unborn prophet gave a mute sign which Elisabeth devoutly interpreted as a recognition of his unborn Lord. To her words Mary responded with the *Magnificat*.

The birth of Elisabeth's child, a few months later, was the occasion of much rejoicing and congratulation among the kindred and neighbors of the humble priestly family, and when the day of his circumcision—his christening, as we should call it—came, they assembled to witness the ceremony and to share in its accompanying festivity. At this time the child was named. Naturally the relatives of the family proposed to name him Zacharias, after his father; but, to their surprise, the mother demurred, saying that he should be called John. Appeal was made to the father, singularly enough, by signs, since apparently he was only dumb, and not also deaf. He, calling for a tablet, wrote: "His name is John." Before the act of circumcision was performed a benediction was spoken, and the service closed with a prayer, in which the name was bestowed upon the child, in the words: "Our God, and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called in Israel John, the son of Zacharias."¹ Immediately the good priest's tongue was loosed, and he burst forth with the *Benedictus*.

The only further note of John's early life, even in Luke's gospel, is the statement: "The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts until the day of his showing unto Israel."

With this may be compared the statement which closes the account of Jesus' infancy: "The child grew, and waxed strong, becoming filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him."

The protevangelium of James² relates that John was among the infants whom Herod sought to slay, and that Elisabeth, hearing of it, went into the hill country and sought for concealment. Finding none she "groaned and said with a loud voice, 'Mount of God, receive a mother with her child.' And suddenly the mountain was divided and received her. And light shone

¹ See EDERSHEIM, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. I, p. 157.

² Chaps. 22-4.

through to them; for the angel of the Lord was with them, preserving them."

Herod, angered by the child's escape, caused Zacharias to be killed in the temple near the altar, where, some time afterward, congealed blood was found by a priest more venturesome than the rest. When the others went in "the wainscotings of the temple shrieked out, and were cleft from top to bottom. And they found not his body, but found his blood turned to stone." The cleaving of the wainscoting recalls to our minds the rending of the veil of the temple when Jesus died. Perhaps the latter suggested this feature to the author of the story.

The child was thus left fatherless. Later, Elisabeth also died, and, according to another apocryphal writing,¹ at her death angels took him under their care.

From this time on there is no record, even legendary, of John's childhood and youth. We can only surmise that he grew up a recluse, nurturing within himself, in the midst of the wild scenery of the mountain wilderness west of the Dead Sea, that sternly devoted and ascetic spirit which he manifested at his appearance to herald the coming of one mightier than he "whose fan is in his hand, thoroughly to cleanse his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire." Instinctively we recall Elijah, and



MARY, JESUS, AND JOHN—RAPHAEL
(*La Belle Jardinière*)

¹ FABRICIUS, *Cod. Apocryph.*, pp. 117 sq.

Amos, the herdman of Tekoa ; but the likeness between John and these appears only when he comes out of seclusion to fulfil his great mission of "preaching the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins." The mysterious man issuing from the mountains, clad in a coarse garment of camel's hair, girt about the loins with a leathern girdle, and satisfying the demands of nature with the wild product of the rocks and the forest, gives us little suggestion of the child born in a priest's house and loved as an only son given to bless and brighten aged parents.

Any attempt to describe the boyhood of the Baptist would, therefore, be purely a work of the imagination. If his parents, contrary to the legend of the *protevangelium*, long survived his birth, he doubtless grew up in the humble priest's home, and was faithfully schooled in the great history and sublime hopes of his people, and in the simple piety of the devout Hebrews. If he was early left an orphan, he probably was cared for by his kindred until he could care for himself. He may have had the instruction of some country rabbi as well as of his parents, but among his teachers none would be more influential than the scenes amidst which he lived—the lonely mountains, the bare and somber rocks, the sullen sea, too sluggish to ripple under the breeze or play about the base of the cliffs that walled it in, and the intense sky, with its unmitigable sunshine by day and its burning stars by night. What these taught him we may not distinctly know, but that they helped to mold his feeling, and to shape his thought of God and man, and to breed in him a spirit fitted for his unique mission in the world, we may easily believe. Was his boyhood one bereft of companions and play and eager childish industry ? It is difficult to think of him as like other children, even as like Jesus, whose boyhood in busy Galilee must have been more varied in its experiences, more social and more humane than his. Did the two boys, whose mothers claimed kinship, ever meet ? There is nothing in the record to forbid the supposition ; nor is there anything to confirm it. After all our reflection on it, John's life seems most fitly expressed in his own words : "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." Thus he dispersonalized himself. In the som-

berness and solemnity of the wilderness all the petty egotisms of the individual man vanished, and he became but the voice of divine prophecy announcing to men a new crisis of revelation. Behind his self-effacing announcement, however far back in his past I may look and listen, I find it hard to fancy the sunny, unconscious face and the glad or careless cry of a child.

Art has found in John the Baptist a favorite subject. As a child he appears in many pictures of the Mother and Child. The pictures of his infancy show a serious, wistful face; those of his manhood usually represent him as a lean and cadaverous ascetic, though there are several striking exceptions, notably one by Titian, and a more youthful one by, I think, Andrea del Sarto. Among the pictures of the child John several of the most beautiful are by Murillo.



JOHN THE BAPTIST—TITIAN